

# Preaching on Purgatory

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*Because today there is so little preaching on this topic, it was suggested that it might be useful if this sermon was put into print, in spite of its mildly esoteric character. It was given at a Solemn Requiem Mass at Balliol College, Oxford, on 20 January. The Mass was being attended by a wide range of members and friends of the College, only a minority of them Catholics, for it was being celebrated to mark the 700th anniversary of the death of the College's co-founder, the Lady Dervorguilla, mother of John of Balliol, King of Scotland.*

'Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.'<sup>1</sup>

According to St Luke, the Lord dies fully conscious, quoting this line from the 31st psalm: 'Into thy hands I commit my spirit!' And, later on, in St Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, we hear St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, saying as he is dying: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And in the 1st epistle of Peter Christians suffering severe hardship are told to 'entrust their souls to a faithful Creator'.

Trusting ourselves to God, letting go, putting ourselves in the hands of God. Down through the ages numerous holy men and women have urged us to do this, but it is not quite as easy as it sounds. There are all sorts of obstacles—our sins, hang-ups deep down inside us—that stop nearly all of us, right until the end, right until death, from letting go completely.

And what has all this got to do with the Lady Dervorguilla, and with our being gathered like this in the chapel of the college which she founded?

St Augustine said: '*Ipse*, post istam vitam, sit locus noster'—'After this life God himself is our place.'<sup>2</sup> As the Swiss theologian, the late Hans Urs von Balthasar, put it: 'God is the creature's "last thing"'. He is in our heaven when we gain him, our hell when we lose him, our judgement when we are examined by him, our purgatory when we are purified by him.'<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all Christians would probably agree with nearly all that, but some would not like to hear God being called 'our purgatory'. 'How can a God of love possible be called that?' they would say.

The fact is, although we may, when we die, make a basic commitment to God, most of us go into death still with quite a lot of

those obstacles I spoke about: those hang-ups that have stopped us from giving ourselves over completely to God, from being able to say with our whole being 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit'. From what I know about myself, I very much fear that that will be the case with me.

And the Catholic Church in the West has long believed that, while being transformed into a sharer in God's life must certainly be wonderful for a human being—there is no doubt about that—all the same, for many of us, that transformation could at the very deepest level also be painful ... painful because it means being separated from all those things in us that are ungodly, all that we have clung to that has kept us apart from God.

But the Catholic Church in the West (I say 'the West' here, because Christians have another way of talking in the East) also believes that through our prayers we, the living, can help the dead—help them to be freed from those painful things. And, because 'the world beyond death' is radically different from this world, because territorial time is no part of it, there is no theological reason why we should not pray for somebody who died even as much as 700 years ago, especially if that person is somebody whom we have a special link with. The Lady Dervorguilla, for instance.

A powerful and influential 16th-century member of my Order, Dominic Soto, said that our prayers for a dead person have no efficacy ten years after the person's death, since nobody could possibly remain that long in purgatory. But Alexander VII, a baroque Pope with better philosophical instincts (or, rather, whose Jesuit friends had better philosophical instincts), said in 1666 that Dominic Soto was talking rubbish.<sup>4</sup>

I remember one morning during the years I was working in Rome I found myself concelebrating at a Requiem Mass, the purpose of which was at first completely beyond me. Gradually, as the preacher at it went on, it occurred to me that it was 15 March: the Ides of March, 'a day of mourning in ancient Rome', as he was reminding us. I was concelebrating at a Requiem Mass for Julius Caesar.

But praying for the dead, any dead, whether they died this morning or 2034 years ago, only really makes sense if we see ourselves as one people, and as only being complete persons insofar as we identify with that one people. And this is something that does not come to us easily today, when our whole way of thinking is so individualistic.

St Bernard, in one of his sermons for All Saints day, gives us a lively picture of the elect standing at the threshold of heaven: 'Jam multi ex nobis in atriis stant, expectantes donec impleatur numerus fratrum; in illam beatissimam domum non sine nobis intrabunt, id est non sancti sine plebe.'<sup>5</sup> They are ready to enter the house of God but cannot do so until *all* of us who make the choice for God can enter too. The saints, according to St Bernard, cannot be perfectly happy until we are sharing their happiness: in fact, they cannot be saints 'sine plebe'.

Wrote a mediaeval monk to his absent very dear friend: 'When you are at prayer you are in my presence, and I am in yours. Do not be surprised because I say *presence*; for if you love me, and it is because I am the image of God that you love me, I am as much in your presence as you are in your own. All that you are substantially, that am I.' He goes on: 'If you love the image of God, you love me as the image of God; and I, in my turn, loving God, love you. So seeking the same thing, tending towards the same thing, we are ever in one another's presence, in God, in whom we love each other.'<sup>6</sup>

A now-dead member of this College who was here in the mid-20s, a contemporary of Graham Greene, my fellow-Dominican Father Gervase Mathew, thought there was absolutely nothing peculiar about saying Mass for the repose of the souls of the dead of Agincourt. He was doing that sort of thing all the time. It is not the sort of thing that I would do, but then I belong to a different generation. He, I think, shared instinctively something of this vision of the unity of the people of God, this vision which we in our day-to-day lives have largely lost.

I would still, however, argue for the basic authenticity of that vision. When we here, who have special bonds with Balliol, pray that the Lady Dervorguilla and the College's deceased benefactors and members down through the ages may all share fully in the glory of the life of God we are really doing two things.

We are thanking God for those lives. After all, there is no better way of thanking God for a human being than by wishing the best imaginable for that human being. But we are also—and surely this is equally important—affirming our identity with them, actually *caring* for them, caring for these people who otherwise are merely strangers to us. And in that way we are helping to strengthen bonds: the bonds that bind together all who over the centuries have come to the College. St Augustine nearly always has the last word (he wrote so many), and it was, of course, Augustine who said: 'ubi individua caritas, ibi perfecta unitas'.<sup>7</sup>

Is it altogether unreasonable to hope that in 700 years' time a group of Balliol people will be remembering us?

- 1 Luke 23:46. The Gospel Reading at this Mass was Luke 23:44—49; 24:1—5.
- 2 *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 30, s 3; 8 (PL 36, 252; CCL 38, p. 218).
- 3 'Eschatologie', in *Fragen der Theologie heute*, pp. 407—8.
- 4 Cf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer 2063; L. Boros: *The Moment of Truth*, London 1962, p. 192.
- 5 *In festo omnium sanctorum*, sermo 3 (cf. Apoc. 6:11); sermo 4, n. 2 (PL 183, 468—73).
- 6 *Meditationes piissimae de cognitione humanae conditionis*, c. 15, n. 14 (PL 184, 495). Cf. also quotation from Claudianus Mamertus in H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, ET London 1950, pp. 242f.
- 7 Cf. de Lubac, op. cit. p. 51.